

February 23rd, 2025

Luke 6:27-38 “Love Without Limits”

Last week we studied the first part of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Flat Place” in Luke’s gospel. Now, if you weren’t here last week, you might be thinking, “Wait, isn’t that ‘Sermon on the Mount?’” Sort of. Matthew’s gospel gives us an account of Jesus going to a high place – a mountain to teach the core values of what it means to be a disciple. Because we’re here on the West Coast of the United States, we need to stop for a minute and talk about the difference between what we consider a “mountain” and what people living in the ancient Middle East called a mountain. When we think “Mountain” we think of something that has a glacial pack year-round. For us, a mountain has to be at least 11,500 feet above sea level which is the timber line for mountains in the Sierra Nevada range. That’s the elevation where trees no longer grow. When I moved from here to Johnson City, Tennessee in 1991, people kept referring to the hills in that part of the Appalachians as “mountains.” Granted, some of them were big hills, but there were trees on them and no year-round glacial pack. When I was working with the Virginia Regional Youth Council in 2005, the General Assembly of our denomination was in Portland, Oregon in July. The kids we brought to General Assembly had never been to the West Coast. They were amazed with this city that had such a clear view of a mountain that had snow on it in July. One day, they had an outing on the Coast near Canon Beach with the leaders of the General Youth Council. I stayed in Portland that day because I was leading a workshop. These east coast kids’ idea of a beach in July was a hot, sandy, flat beach on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean where the waters were almost bath water temperature. When they got back from this outing, Hannah Ott, the president of our youth council said, “Oh my gosh! It was amazing! It was so cold! And the water was freezing! And the sky was so clear you could see the moon in the middle of the day! And there’s like these mountains that look like they’re growing out of the ocean!” Mountains. I thought that was so cute.

In the middle east, along the Jordan River anything above level ground was considered a “mountain.” Monkey Face over at Upper Bidwell Park would be considered a mountain. So when I read Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, that’s what I visualize – Jesus preaching from Monkey Face while the crowd is listening from below. But the writer of Luke says Jesus taught on a “flat place,” and as we learned last week, that difference in location isn’t really important. As far as the oral tradition is concerned, the gospel writers are talking about the same event. Jesus taught a crowd of his followers about the beatitudes and the golden rule. Which leads to an interesting article I read not long ago about the differences between one gospel writer’s account of this event and another’s. What if Luke’s use of “flat place” or a “level place” had more to do with the theme of Jesus’ sermon rather than the place? Maybe this was Luke’s way of transmitting the idea that in God’s kingdom, everyone is on the same level. No one is elevated above anyone else, and no one is hidden below where they get trampled on. Think about the examples Jesus gives to back this up. In this sermon, he speaks of a world where the poor are happy, and the wealthy are sad. He calls us to a “level place” where no one is lifted up higher than others.

See, it’s not the physical location that matters most. It’s not whether Jesus taught from a high place or a flat place. In Luke’s gospel, the flat place illustrates where people are located in the social structure of God’s kingdom. *Everyone* is on the same level ground. When I first came here, I used to preach from the pulpit – but after a while I thought, “I don’t like being *up* there.” I want to preach from a place where I’m on the same level as the people. It’s part of the reason we have the communion table down here too. Now, there were a few folks who objected to those decisions. Some people said, “Having a chancel makes it easier to see what’s going on up front.” One couple who came from a different church tradition said, “The pulpit is your mantle of leadership. You *should* be up higher than the rest of us.” I guess they saw the pulpit as sort of like the “captain’s chair” of the church. And considering the tradition they came from, I get that and respect that. I just didn’t agree. It wasn’t for me. And to be fair, I’m not saying that anyone who prefers to preach from the

pulpit is wrong. That's not the case at all. I personally know everyone who has stood behind that pulpit since I've been here, and none of them feel like they're better than anyone else. That's not the reason they prefer the pulpit.

I'm sure when Matthew wrote that Jesus taught from a "mountain," it made sense to his readers because yeah, acoustically that's a better place for people to hear. It doesn't mean that Jesus was being 'haughty' or didn't want to be among the people. Also, Matthew's gospel came out of a primarily Jewish community where mountains are highly symbolic. Moses taught the wandering Hebrew people from a mountain. Moses received the ten commandments on a mountain. Matthew's audience would have appreciated and related more to the image of Jesus preaching from a mountain. For them, he was the "new Moses." Luke, on the other hand, came out of a mostly gentile community. For them, it was more significant that Jesus *didn't* follow the same social rules as the Roman leaders. Jesus didn't need to be on a high place like Caesar, or a Roman orator or some other official. Jesus wanted to break down the barriers between those who are lifted up and those who are kept down. For Luke's audience they might have understood the theme of Jesus' sermon better if it was on a flat place.

Here's where we need to be careful when we talk about this vision of a place where everything and everyone is level. Some people say that verses 24 – 26 where Jesus says, "Woe to you that are rich" is a call to social rebellion or even violent upheaval. That's not what this was. It wasn't 2,000 years ago, and it isn't today. Back then, there were people known as the Zealots and the Sicarii who were all about using violence to take down their wealthy oppressors. They weren't in the least bit subtle about their objectives. In fact, the word Sicarii literally means "knife" or "people of the knife." They believed that the Messiah's primary mission was to lead a violent rebellion against the Romans. But that *wasn't* Jesus primary mission. Jesus made his agenda very clear back in Luke 4 at his home synagogue when he quoted Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And now here he was on a level place out in the Judean countryside saying, "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you." The Zealots would surely reject that message, and yet one of Jesus' apostles was known as Simon the Zealot. He went from one who's extreme views on Jewish independence led to violent opposition to one who believed in Jesus' message of love without limits.

Throughout history, (which some of you say, "Oh, 'throughout history' is Jesse's way of saying, 'today.'") Okay, but remember, I believe that there's nothing new under the sun. The writer of Ecclesiastes was spot-on when he wrote that. I believe that history is cyclical. There are negative patterns that repeat over and over again that put us in danger and keep us from being aligned with God. And because we think history is boring, we fail to recognize these patterns when they're happening in the here and now. Or else we *do* recognize when they're happening but we say, "Oh, but it'll be different this time." How does that *ever* work out? Anyway, back to what I was saying – Throughout history there have been Christians who have decided that the best way to deal with injustice is to take up the blade of the Zicari and forcefully take down those who they believe are their oppressors. And yet, here's Jesus saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." And, "Be merciful, just as your God is merciful." That doesn't even make sense! That's not how the world works! And you're right. It isn't. Jesus' path is *not* the way of the kingdoms of the earth. But remember, Jesus is the ambassador of the Kingdom of God, and he calls us to be ambassadors too – ambassadors for the one whose love knows no limits.

Yeah, but you don't understand! There are church leaders out there who say they're Christians, but they teach their people to take up arms and to forcefully overthrow whoever they've determined is "the enemy." There are churches out there who hold fund-raisers with raffles like we do at our annual Holiday Bazaar, except instead of the nice hand-carved Christmas ornaments that we use as prizes, they raffle guns! "Oh, you're

exaggerating pastor.” [Show Slide] Again. I don’t make this stuff up. And this is not a joke or parody or “fake news.” This was on their website. In fact, another version of this has a QR code that you can scan and it will take you to their website where you will experience a master class in white Christian Nationalism. And I hope you’re thinking, “Good grief, have they not read this sermon on the plain or Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount? Well, we kind of talked about that last week, didn’t we? Maybe they *haven’t* heard about the sermon on mount or the flat place. Their leader probably has, but that doesn’t always get transmitted to the people. And this is why I encourage you to read the scriptures and study them for yourself. This is why I encourage you to ask me questions or even challenge me. I’m not “up here,” and you all aren’t “down there.” We are all on this flat plain where we do our best to practice this “love without limits” that Jesus requires of us. Practicing it can transform lives, families, workplaces, churches, and -- even nations.